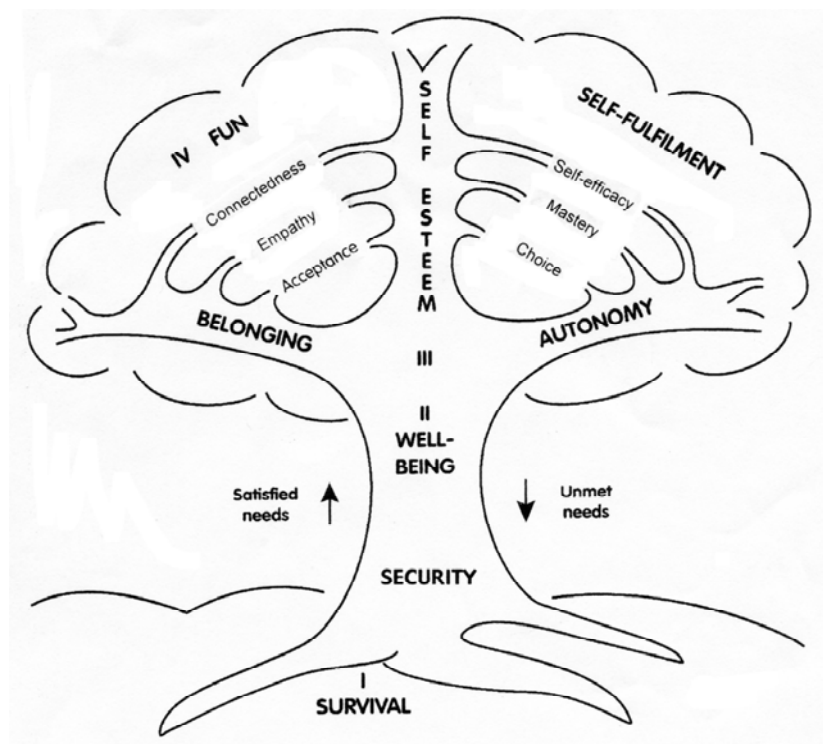


SPIRITED CHILDREN

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Humans' most basic need is to be confident that they will survive; when this need is satisfied, they need to feel physically well and emotionally secure. At the next level of need are the three emotional requirements for self-esteem, belonging and autonomy. (Not to be confused with independence, autonomy means feeling in command of decisions that affect us, having choice, steering our own course in life.) Finally, at the highest level of need are the 'luxury' needs for fun and to fulfil your mission in life. These four levels of need are illustrated in the diagram below (Porter 2008).



For the topic under discussion here – that is, spirited children – it's the three emotional needs that we need to focus on. These are the needs that are depicted as the tree's three branches in the diagram. As you can see from the model, these needs are not separate: we cannot develop self-esteem in a vacuum, but gain our self-esteem from feeling connected to others, and from being in command of our own lives.

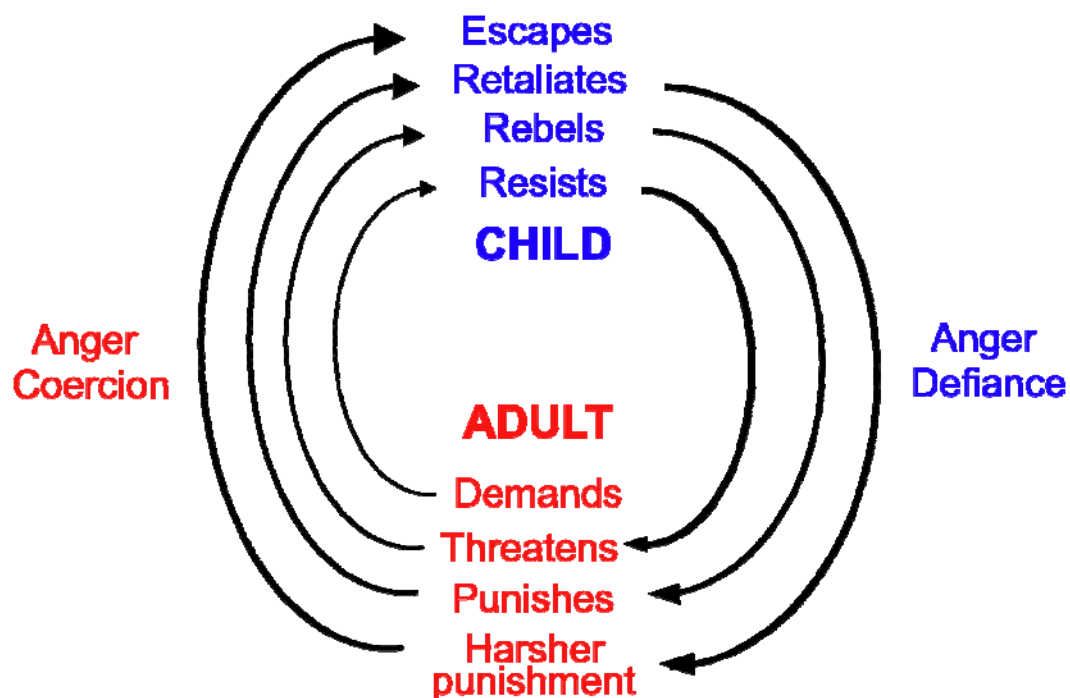
Although there is ample research evidence verifying each of these three emotional needs, the next observation is based on my experience. I have found that you can divide the population (roughly) 80/20. Eighty percent of children want you to like them and will try to please you. They will occasionally

act thoughtlessly but, once aware of their mistake, are remorseful and will try to make amends. These children do not need punishment, as they are already contrite. These youngsters gain most of their self-esteem from their need to belong (including to be approved of). You might picture their self-esteem branch not centred as I have drawn it here, but leaning to the left.

The other 20 percent of children – the spirited or non-conformist children – gain most of their self-esteem from being in command of their own lives. They have a strong need for autonomy. (You might picture their self-esteem branch leaning to the right.) In adult life, we call these people ‘control freaks’. Children who are spirited are prepared to risk your displeasure to prove to you that you can’t make them do stuff. If you do try to control them, their behaviour deteriorates. They resist, rebel and retaliate – and, ultimately escape psychologically by refusing to listen to you.

These spirited children are the ones whose behaviour most seems out of control and most in need of external ‘consequences’. But, when you use punishment (or even rewards) for these children, their behaviour gets worse. A dance results, in which adults demand child compliance, which the children resist; adults then threaten punishment and the children rebel; adults deliver punishment and the children retaliate; finally, adults deliver still harsher punishment, in response to which the children escape (physically or psychologically).

This ‘dance’ can be illustrated as:



In its extreme form, this cycle is labelled as *Oppositional defiance disorder*, which blames the children for their role, while overlooking that the adults match the child's anger and defiance with their own anger and coercion.

However, this 'dance' of adult coercion and child defiance is not the fault of the individuals: *the problem is not the dancers, but the dance*. Given that the cycle surrounding the behaviour is circular, the search for an initial cause is both fruitless and unnecessary, because there *is* no beginning or end in a circle. As the starting point does not matter, the place to intervene in this repetitive cycle is with *yourself*. This is explained by an analogy suggested by Fisch and colleagues (1982) who observe that, if you wanted to put an end to a tennis rally, you could try to convince your opponent to concede defeat and surrender, but it would be more efficient simply to discard your own racquet. Once this dance is entrenched, adults will find that it is virtually impossible to convince children to be the ones to 'discard their racquet': the adults have to initiate the change. Not only is this more effective, but it is also responsible: after all, we are the grown-ups. Our job is not to seek retribution for children's past misdeeds, to fix blame, or locate a culprit – but to find solutions.

The solution will not lie in being punitive. If present controlling interventions were going to work, they would have by now. Given that they have not, in the words of Fisch and colleagues (1982: 88) you will need to 'change a losing game' or, quite simply, obey the self-evident truth that if something isn't working, you should stop doing it and try something else instead.

Given that, to date, most adults will have been trying to make children stop their defiant behaviour but, given that these efforts have failed, it is time to abandon rewards and punishments. Children cannot defy a force that does not exist.

Therefore, you will need to use a guidance approach. For a description of this approach, see Porter (2006) or the paper *Guiding children's behaviour* on this website.

FURTHER READING

Kurcinka, M.S. (1991). *Raising your spirited child: A guide for parents whose child is more intense, sensitive, perceptive, persistent, energetic*. New York: Harper Perennial.

I thought that this book described spirited children well, although there was little specific guidance on how to respond to them.

Porter, L. (2006). *Children are people too: A parent's guide to young children's behaviour*. (4th ed.) Adelaide, SA: East Street Publications.

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REFERENCES

Fisch, R., Weakland, J.H. & Segal, L. (1982). *The tactics of change: Doing therapy briefly*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Porter, (2008). *Young children's behaviour: Practical approaches for caregivers and teachers*. (3rd ed.) Sydney: Elsevier.